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CRITICAL NOTES.

THE GOSPELS AS A SOURCE FOR THE LIFE OF CHRIST.

DURING the last seventy years there has been an almost unintermittent succession of "lives of Jesus." The series of what we may call modern "lives of Christ" opens with the celebrated work of the rationalist Paulus, published in 1828, which he characteristically entitled *Das Leben Jesu als Grundlage einer reinen Geschichte des Urchristentums* (two volumes). In 1835 Strauss issued his *Leben Jesu*, in which he dealt with the contents of the gospels as myths, rejecting not only the miraculous element pleaded for by orthodox supernaturalism, but also the naturalistic explanation of miracles which rationalism had sought to establish. Neander, in 1837, and Lange, in 1844 ff., endeavored to reply to Strauss by elaborate vindications of the historical accuracy of the gospels as sources for the life of Jesus. One of the ablest of this historico-critical school was Weisse, who, in his *Evangelische Geschichte, kritisch und philosophisch bearbeitet* (two volumes, 1838), accepted Mark's gospel as most accurate and generally trustworthy, distinguishing, however, even in it, portions as historical and others as unhistorical. Since that period almost every year has witnessed the appearance of lives of Jesus by German, French, English, and American authors, and presenting all conceivable points of view, from the purely rationalistic to the most severely orthodox. But whatever the point of view of the writers of those lives might be, and whatever their views of the character and credibility of the canonical gospels might be, in this at least they were all agreed that the gospels claimed to be the one adequate source of the life of Jesus, and that from them, or at least from the residuum left after the application of the approved critical tests, a life of Jesus as he was, or as he was conceived of by the evangelists, might be drawn up. It is, of course, quite evident that, if we are to have a biography of Jesus, the materials for it must be sought in contemporary documents, such as the canonical gospels profess to be. But the question may very properly be raised as to whether our gospels are, or even profess to be, biographies, or collections of materials for biographies, of Jesus. If they do not afford material for such a biography, if there be important constituent parts of a biography for which we obtain nothing in their

pages, then no such materials exist, and the construction of a life of Jesus in the sense of a biography is impossible.

Quite recently the discussions occasioned by the Ritschlian development have led such men as Martin Kähler, of Halle, to consider the question as to whether this "life of Jesus movement" is warrantable, whether it is allowable for the extremely energetic and able propagandists of that school to bring forward their historical Christ as the Jesus of biography, and to set up the story of the man Jesus as the whole Bible, rejecting all else as mere dogmatism. Attention must here be called to a distinction, to which we must return later on: If Christ is more than a mere man in respect of his nature, task, and present position, he is superhistorical, and in such a case, but only in such a case, the historical Jesus as presented in the gospels is of incomparable worth. With this presupposition kept steadily in view, we cannot have too many details of his earthly life. We shall rightly cherish every tradition regarding him, and will grudge no expenditure of toil and care in sifting the documentary sources which tell of his doings or sufferings. But when we come to attempt the construction of a consistent conception of his human consciousness and personal development, keeping hold all the while of the presupposition of his superhuman nature, task, and rank, we soon find ourselves short of materials. We come upon something which necessitates our going back to obtain information about its genesis, but our documents give us no help. We need something to explain an act, a line of thought, an unexpected appearing, a sudden disappearing; but our gospels afford us no materials, nor do their writers betray any consciousness of having failed to collect such details as might have been expected from them. From the documents which we have it is evidently as impossible to construct a psychological biography of Jesus as it is to produce a geographical and chronological journal of his doings from the cradle to the grave.

The great diversity which characterizes the lives of Jesus constructed from the gospels ought of itself to give rise to the question as to whether these gospels were ever intended to be sources of a biography. To mention only a few of this class of works, restricting ourselves to those that are accessible to readers of books in the English language only, we have the writings of Strauss, Renan, Ewald, Keim, Weiss, Farrar, Hanna. All these biographies of Jesus admit that their only source is the gospel narrative, each of them constructing his "life" from what he regards as the true constituents of that primary and only source.

Among these we have at least one who accepts almost nothing, and one who accepts absolutely everything. It is, perhaps, easy to discount the work of such extreme men as Strauss and Renan — the one so utterly unsympathetic, and the other so lacking in depth and ethical appreciation. But, even when we have to do with believing critical historians, we see how they differ from one another, and how entirely different in form, as well as in matter, their productions are from the work of the simple believer who reproduces his evangelical sources without the application of any critical test. Surely this quite naturally and necessarily raises the question as to whether those gospels which, when so used, can be interpreted in so many ways, were ever intended to be so used. We do not call attention at this point to the meagerness of the information of this sort supplied by these gospels, but to the question that arises as to the historicity of the detailed narratives. It is surely quite evident that the canonical gospels lay themselves open to the possibility of such critical treatment simply by this, that they propose to themselves an altogether different task from that of providing material for a biography. It is the presupposition of the supernatural, the assumption that alongside of and under the human there is a super-human power, which renders our gospels liable to attack, and their narratives, when thus dealt with by naturalistic criticism, subject to such serious curtailment. It is simply the miraculous element in the gospels that gives offense. If it is simply material for a biography that we are in quest of, the application of criticism in order to get rid of this is quite legitimate. It is the natural, not the supernatural, that we require for a biography. And so, if we grant the Ritschlian claim for a merely historical Christ, for a Christ of biography, whose life can and must be told like that of any other man, then we can raise no objection to the critical elimination of the miraculous element from the gospels. Those who undertake to construct a biography of Jesus — using this term in its strict and accurate sense — can make use only of the natural element in the gospels. The residuum available will be found meager enough. Every trace of eternal preëxistence; of incarnation in the sense of God becoming man, as distinguished from the idea of man becoming God; of absolute sinlessness, as not merely a negative, but also a positive quality; of power to work miracles, of resurrection, of continued personal existence, must of necessity disappear. This can be of no service to, and can have no validity for, those who hold by the historical Christ of the Ritschlians. And when we have subtracted all these from the gospels, what have we left? Is there anything remaining

out of which we may construct a biography or anything else? So far as I am aware, no Ritschlian has yet attempted to construct a life of Christ. We have a Ritschlian encyclopædia (Heinrici), a Ritschlian history of doctrines (Harnack), Ritschlian dogmatics and dogmatic discussions in abundance; also a perfect flood of Ritschlian treatises on all varieties of christological questions; but no Ritschlian life of Christ. Why is this? Is it not just because everyone is reluctant to undertake the task of making bricks without straw? This is at least one good result of the consistency and regardlessness of consequences with which the Ritschlian school has carried out its naturalistic principles, and it has caused men at last to acknowledge that, whatever else the gospels may be useful for, it is certainly not for providing materials for the biography of the historical man Jesus.

A biographer may follow either of two courses. He may, on the one hand, give full details of the particular facts which go to make up the whole life-career as viewed from the outside. In that case we would require in sources a rich abundance of materials regarding all the periods of the life, and all the situations with regard to other persons and things into which the life-activities of the individual had brought him. We have sometimes volumes of collections published professing to be storehouses from which some future biographer may draw his materials for a well-balanced life of some individual who played an important part in history. An example of this is found in Canon Robertson's *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury*, in several volumes, and in these volumes anyone who undertakes to write about Becket's life will find gathered together all original documents, informative or illustrative, known to exist. Or, on the other hand, the biographer may seek psychologically to treat of the causes that underlie certain phenomena of conduct. For such a task sources of a somewhat different kind are necessary. Incidents must be related which reveal special qualities of character or disposition, or illustrate what may be regarded as the individuality of the man. These, at least, are the incidents which the psychological biographer will use in order to make his sketch true to the life. Now, it must be quite evident that the gospels are not sources for the life of Jesus in the former sense. No attempt is made by any of the writers of these works to produce anything like a complete narrative of the facts of the life. It was not the want of materials that caused this. Every here and there in the synoptic gospels we have allusions to unrecorded discourses and index-like summaries under classified

headings of crowds of miracles, which clearly imply that the writer could have enlarged his work almost indefinitely by recording facts known to him which he passed over. It simply did not lie within the scope of his work to chronicle the details of the earthly life of the man Jesus, and he is neither writing a biography nor providing materials for any future biography. It is equally clear that the evangelists make no attempt to account for the human life of Jesus on psychological principles. We do not, for example, find them endeavoring to determine the natural temperament of Jesus as a man in order thereby to account for the prevailing tone of his discourses, his treatment of those who came to him for healing or instruction, the attitude he assumed toward his opponents, or the views that he expressed at different periods regarding his divine mission and the method of its accomplishment. In the biography of a man with such a career as that of Jesus we should rightly have demanded some attempt to account for the procedure of the subject of it, when that procedure stands in need of such elucidation, as in the case of Jesus it notoriously does. We should estimate the success of the biographer according to the measure in which his delineation of the emotional, intellectual, and moral character of his subject affords a satisfactory explanation of the facts. Neither, then, as a chronicler of the facts of the life nor as a psychological accounting for those facts can our canonical gospels be regarded as in any true sense a biography of Jesus, or as a collection of sources affording materials for such a work.

The actual purpose for which the gospels were written is stated by John (John 20:31): "These are written that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing ye might have life through his name." This statement, which, of course, primarily applies to the fourth gospel, affords a thoroughly correct explanation of the purpose of the writers of the first three gospels. Hence it is quite evident that what the gospels actually do offer is not material for a biography of Jesus, but a picture of the Son of man from the point of view of faith in the Son of God, drawn by believers for believers and for those who wish to believe. If this fact be only fairly faced and accepted, all ground is taken away from the popular cry, often so ignorantly, or at least so inconsiderately, repeated: "Back to the gospels in order to get back to Christ!" The only sort of plausible excuse for such a cry lay in the assumption that in the gospels we have a purely biographical sketch of the man Jesus, a simple transcript of his words, and a purely objective report of his doings, as distinguished from the

more or less *tendency*-representation of him which we have in the epistles, in which we have estimates of him and of his teaching by believers largely influenced by their own deliberate and mature beliefs. The attitude of the evangelists is precisely that of the writers of the epistles, and their work is nothing less than a reproduction of the historical foundation on which the doctrinal superstructure of the epistles has been reared. And this reproduction, we must remember, was made in full view of, and therefore implies presumably full approbation of, the contents of that doctrinal superstructure. The incidents of speech and action which they report they do, indeed, guarantee as facts which actually took place, which, as real occurrences, serve as characteristics of the life in which the whole Christian system has its roots; but they write as men who are already thoroughly convinced of the doctrinal significance of that life to which those incidents belong. In their thoughts and in their writings the historical Jesus is assuredly and of necessity the same as the Christ of Christianity. Only on the supposition of a distinction between these two, the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, can we have in the gospels, or from material supplied by the gospels, a biography of Jesus.

The question here arises as to the legitimacy of the use now commonly made of the phrase "the historical Jesus" or "the Christ of history." In christological literature the phrase has come to have a well-defined application. By Dorner, and theologians of a similar tendency, it has been used to indicate the Christ depicted in Scripture, as contrasted with the ideal Christ of the Hegelian speculative theology. It was employed to designate the Christ as set forth in the whole of the New Testament Scripture, in the epistles as well as in the gospels. This surely was a most legitimate use of the phrase, and as thus employed it supplied a very convenient and highly useful technical term. What the speculative theology offered was an ideal biography constructed from materials gathered from the gospel narratives, but selected from them, amplified, and interpreted according to the standard furnished by the consciousness of the biographer in its conception of the ideal man. It was assumed by the speculative theologians that this Christ is only ideal, realized, it may be, in the history and development of the race in its totality, but of necessity never attaining a complete and perfect form in the life of any individual man. In contrast to this ideal Christ, the so-called mediating theologians, as well as theologians of the more strictly confessional and orthodox school, were wont to call attention to the Christ of history

as the Christ of the gospels and of the whole New Testament. This Christ of history, they maintained, was also the Christ of faith. But now, notwithstanding the fact of this easily appreciable and generally accepted usage of the phrase, we find it commonly employed by Ritschlians, and theological writers more or less influenced by Ritschl, to indicate something that the so-called historical narratives cannot give, something that stands out as distinctly differentiated from anything that traditional reports, oral or written, can ever give. In one of the most interesting sections of a well-known work of one of the most winsome and edifying of all the writers of that fruitful school¹ we have a clear explanation of the Ritschlian use of this phrase. "When we speak," says Hermann, "of *the historical Christ*, we mean that personal life of Jesus which speaks to us from the New Testament, viewed as the disciples' testimony to their faith. Historical research can never give this nor take it away, and when we have it we know that we are at one with the living church in possessing that gift of God which brings about our redemption." There is a wonderful warmth of expression, fitted to cheer the heart of the most pronounced evangelical, in Hermann's declaration that there is nothing so necessary in Christendom as the preaching of Christ. But he soon makes it plain that the historical Christ of which he is thinking may be preached and believed in altogether apart from the acceptance of the so-called evangelical facts on the strength of New Testament narratives and doctrines. The story of the virgin-birth of Jesus as the incarnate Son of God, of his teaching this or that other truth, of his having done this or that other miracle, even that of his raising the dead and that of his own rising from the dead, ascending into heaven, and ruling now with God, however impressively delivered, is no gospel, and, if offered as such, is a great hindrance to faith. If we can believe it, it may help to draw our attention to Jesus; but belief in all or any of these narratives or doctrines is not necessary to acceptance of a belief in "the historical Christ." It would not, perhaps, be quite fair to say that "the historical Christ" may be *in no way* connected with the Jesus of history. But certainly with the Ritschlians it is not what Jesus was in historical relations, it is not what he said or what he did in his earthly, temporal life, but only the inner life of Jesus as it appeals to me and awakens in me a certain feeling, that constitutes for me the historical

¹ HERRMANN, *Der Verkehr des Christen mit Gott*, dritte Auflage, Stuttgart, 1896. English translation: *The Communion of the Christian with God*, London, 1895, p. 64, Book II, chap. 1, sec. 15.

Christ. Now, this is surely not only an illegitimate use of the term which has been already in use for something quite different, but, what is far more serious, the violent expulsion from the realm of fact and reality of that which this term had been employed to designate. The historical Jesus, meaning by that the Jesus of Nazareth of the four canonical gospels, no longer exists; at most nothing recorded of him is more than a historical probability, so that no one may rest his faith on the whole of the record or any part of it. Only the general teaching of the evangelist as to the glory and grace of Jesus, the general effect of the impression regarding him which they leave upon the mind, is of any weight, and this only in so far as it awakens in me a spirit capable of appreciation like theirs. At the root of this Ritschlian conception of the historical Christ lies the assumption that the gospels are, and were intended to be, a biography of Jesus. It is only when they are regarded from this point of view that their contents must be subjected to ordinary historical criticism, which, in the most favorable case, can yield only the highest degree of historical probability. Hence on the principles of Ritschlianism there can be no doctrine of inspiration in any real sense. The credibility of the New Testament writers can only be on the same plane with that of other historians. Even when the results of criticism are most favorable, the credibility of the gospels can differ only in degree, and not in kind, from that of other ancient chroniclers. But this way of going to work is justifiable only on the hypothesis that we have simply ordinary men to deal with in the favorable circumstances of contemporaries and eye-witnesses of the events of a purely human life, or the reminiscences of other men of the same type who had opportunities of converse with such. If it were so that the evangelists profess to give a colorless account of what they had seen and heard, or of what had been told them, we might then fairly apply to their writings the same critical method which we make use of when we turn to the monkish histories of hermits, martyrs, or mediæval saints, and discount all that from the mere observer's point of view is evidently the contribution of an excited and ill-regulated fancy, or the conviction of a judgment credulous or easily imposed upon. But, as we have seen, especially from the explicit declaration of John, this by no means expresses the purpose of their writing, nor does it represent the claims which they put forth in behalf of their statement.

The error which vitiates a great deal of the historical and critical work of the Ritschlians consists in this, that they insist upon treating

the New Testament writers, not from the standpoint of the writers, but from their own. Any critical treatment of the narratives of the gospels and the christological doctrines of the epistles which rejects or minimizes the miraculous or supernatural, while seeking to reserve certain incidents as historically or biographically true, offers as a residuum something that has no real existence. Neither evangelist nor apostle reports any one saying or any one act of the man Jesus which may be used in a biography of Jesus, that is, in the life of Jesus from the naturalistic point of view. It ought to be remembered that, whatever the uncertainty of the evangelists or apostles who had been disciples of Jesus may have been previous to the resurrection, at the time when they wrote the canonical gospels or their prototypes he was to them beyond all question the Godman, and it is from this standpoint that they wrote throughout. The Son of God, as his sonship is conceived of by the New Testament writers, is God. It would be blasphemy to think of, or to imagine the possibility of, writing a biography of God. We can tell what God has done in creation and providence and redemption, but no one has ever supposed that, when he has told all he knows or has learned about God's thoughts and God's works, he has written a life of God, or ever gathered materials for such a work. It is absolutely true that the world itself would not contain the collections for a task of that kind. And just because the New Testament writers can never think of Jesus but as God, they know that a life of him in the sense of a biography is impossible. If the attempt were made, they feel sure "that even the world itself would not contain the books that should be written."

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